

Report of the Standing Committee on Social Programs

Report on the 1996/97 Mid-Year Review

Education, Culture and Employment
Justice
Health and Social Services
NWT Housing Corporation

October 11, 1996

October 10, 1996

THE HONOURABLE SAM GARGAN, M.L.A.
SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Speaker,

Your Standing Committee on Social Programs has the honour of presenting its Report on the 1996/97 Mid-Year Review, and commends it to the House.



Tommy Enuaraq, M.L.A.
Chair



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ON SOCIAL PROGRAMS**

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Lynn Elkin
Committee Researcher

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL PROGRAMS

REPORT ON THE 1996/97 MID-YEAR REVIEW

GENERAL COMMENTS

Overall, the Standing Committee on Social Programs was pleased with the mid-year activity status reports provided by the Social Envelope partners.

With the many initiatives underway in the social program departments - community wellness, community justice, income reform - and the government-wide community empowerment initiative, the Standing Committee is concerned about departments working together. Members see a need for a common approach when dealing with communities. The Committee does not view these initiatives as separate entities which can be planned and implemented in isolation. They are interconnected. There has to be a high degree of coordination and integration between these initiatives, at the territorial, regional, and community levels. While each department is working on its own initiatives, members are still looking for more integration and cooperation between the departments.

In all initiatives, the Committee is looking for frameworks which are clear and practical. Members are looking for concrete proposals and implementation ideas. With limited funding and tremendous pressures on our social programs, members echo the concern voiced by the Auditor General recently - we can spend the dollars but we don't necessarily know if the funding is doing what it was meant to do. We need to be clear about what we are trying to achieve before we can determine if we achieve the results we want.

During the initial review of the business plans, the Committee supported a number of reductions in program areas. Members were disappointed to discover over the summer and during the mid-year review that these reductions were implemented without the level of consultation and consideration of creative options that the Committee assumed would take place. For example, the Committee approved in principle reductions to foster care payments for special needs and the fossil fuel subsidy. However, the actual reductions were done without the consultation in developing options that the Committee expected. As a result, in some cases, the departments are now reviewing and revising the way the program is structured. In the next round of business plans, the Committee will be looking more closely at proposed reductions to determine whether appropriate consultation is planned and whether the full range of implications has been considered.

The Committee has a strong concern about subsidies. The government provides subsidies in many program areas. There does not seem to be a consolidation of those subsidies or any detailed corporate knowledge of how these subsidies interact. Members are aware that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment was the lead agency in developing a list of all government subsidies at one point. This type of information would be very valuable in reviewing programs and ensuring consistency in approach between departments. The Committee strongly suggested that the Social Envelope partners prepare a comprehensive list of the subsidies available, at least within the envelope, to assist in the integration of programs.

NWT HOUSING CORPORATION

As part of the mid-year review, the Corporation provided information on its restructuring. The Committee reviewed the new organizational structure and will look at it further during the 1997/98 business plan review. In reviewing the structure, the Committee want to see that the services are delivered as close to communities as possible.

The Committee is aware that amalgamation of the Corporation with Public Works and Services and Transportation is being considered. While some of the work of the Corporation is related to infrastructure development and maintenance, there is another side to the work the Corporation is doing. In many ways, the Corporation's mandate to provide social housing is a key component in our social safety net. Coordination with programs like income reform is crucial. With these considerations as well as the transfer of housing as part of community empowerment, the Committee will be looking closely at any proposal to ensure the social program component of the Corporation is recognized and maintained. The Committee recommends that no implementation of this amalgamation should proceed until all Ordinary Members have a chance to review the proposal and debate its merits.

Regardless of whether the Corporation is being restructured or amalgamated with other departments, members believe that the organization structure could provide more support directly at the community level. There are still many staff at the district level who are supposed to provide community support and development. The Committee suggests it is difficult to do community development in Fort Resolution if you work in Hay River just as it is difficult to do community development in Cape Dorset if you are based in Iqaluit. The Committee would like to see a plan to have more district staff working directly in the communities they are supposed to support. This plan should address the differences between the program and technical sides of the corporation, training needs and the issue of duplication of services (LHOs versus district staff).

Housing is one of the areas being considered by many communities as part of empowerment. The Committee believes that there is a need for appropriate support as communities assume responsibility for the local housing authorities. At the community and territorial levels, integration of housing services with other initiatives in the social envelope is crucial. This must be reflected in any program transfers to communities.

There has been a change in the way Local Housing Authorities are funded. The new arrangement provides incentives to Authorities which find more effective ways of doing business and are able to save money. The Committee supports this approach which rewards those who are effective and efficient in how they do their business.

The Housing Corporation is currently running four pilot projects for panel built homes. These projects are consistent with the need for new and innovative approaches to address our housing shortage. If the results of these pilot projects are positive, the Committee encourages the Corporation to promote this panel construction with a view to having the panels made in the north.

Over the past year, Committee members have had concerns with utility costs in public housing. The Committee asked the Corporation to prepare an analysis of utility costs, with a view to identifying problem areas and solutions. This analysis was provided to the Committee during the review and was very enlightening for both the Corporation and the members. While there are certainly individuals living in public housing who are not careful in their utility use, average public housing consumption is either consistent with or lower than the average usage in private housing. The difference in costs seems to come from the higher government rate the Corporation has to pay for utilities. The analysis provided was very well done and should help the Corporation identify the true areas of concern and develop appropriate solutions.

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND EMPLOYMENT

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment proposed a number of initiatives in its business plan. Based on the information provided during the mid-year report, the Department is moving forward on these projects consistent with the directions approved by the Standing Committee.

The Committee was disappointed that the early intervention initiative is slightly behind schedule. One of the best ways to relieve the stresses on our social programs is through prevention and early intervention. Early intervention is productive, not just for the children and families involved, but also for the network of people who deal with children with difficulties such as teachers, nurses and courtworkers. Members encourage the department to continue with the planning phase and get early intervention programs up and running in our communities.

The issue of an NWT job strategy was raised with the Minister. He suggested that the labour force plan could be considered a summary of the various job strategies that the government is involved with. If this is the case and there is a job strategy within the department, members would like to see this pulled together in a way that people can see it. They want to know if the Minister was just referring to training and pre-employment or a true job strategy which would address affirmative action among other things.

Members had a particular interest in the mining training project. The government is working with Aurora College to establish programs to train northerners for jobs in the mining industry. There was also a job shadow program over the summer which trained 22 students. The Committee will be monitoring this initiative and hopes it will provide northerners with the skills to participate in mining development.

While the Committee was pleased to see the initiatives in the mining areas, members were concerned with what seems to be a piecemeal approach to date. As the Minister indicated, there is significant opportunity for employment with the mining sector, not just in the future but now. Apparently, there are 150 vacancies in mining operations every year. The longer we wait for the government to develop training programs, the more jobs are lost. There are many people in our communities who could take some of these 150 jobs a year if they had the training. As part of the work through Aurora College, the Committee suggests the department consider establishing a mining institute which could train northerners for the opportunities already here and those yet to come.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

The Committee appreciated the candor of the Minister and department in providing a clear picture of the reductions proposed and the lack of success of the department in meeting many of the reduction targets. This openness allowed a free discussion of issues and concerns.

The department has indicated that they are short of their target by almost \$9 million. When the business plan was provided to the Committee in January, members expressed a concern about the ability of the department to achieve what seemed to be a very ambitious slate of reductions and changes. Significant slippage to what the department proposed in medical travel reductions the previous year added to the concerns of the Committee. At the time, the Minister and his staff reassured the members that the department had greatly improved the quality of their analysis and the information they used to make their decisions. They indicated that while there may have been superficial analysis in the past, that was no longer the case.

Despite reservations, the Committee approved the reduction options and gave direction regarding the need for a coordinated approach between some of the options. The mid-year report demonstrates that there is still a problem with the quality of analysis carried out by the department in reviewing options and program changes. This is an area which the Committee considers very serious and hopes the Minister and his staff will make efforts to correct. As we make more difficult decisions over the next year, the Committee must be able to have confidence in the information provided.

The mid-year report talked a lot about planning and studying. In most cases, there are no timelines attached to the projects to indicate when planning will finish and action will begin. In reviewing past reports of the Assembly, the department has always done many studies and plans. The Committee is concerned that it is time to move out of planning mode into implementation mode.

The Committee was under the assumption that the department's business plan was sustainable. Members are concerned that this is apparently not the case. The department indicated that additional work would be required before sustainable plans could be developed. The department also indicated that they are not receiving quarterly reports from the Health boards. If the business plans are not sustainable and there is no regular accountability from the boards who receive a large portion of the department's budget, the Committee questions the validity of the department's next business plan which we expect to review in a few weeks.

The department is supposed to be the leader in community wellness. However, there is a lack of clarity about what the department means by community wellness. Members questioned how communities can be expected to use the Community Action Fund dollars to develop community wellness plans when the Minister has

defined community wellness as "a state of being we aim to achieve". When we are talking about community wellness, communities want and need something concrete and practical. As the Committee has stated before, this does not mean the government should tell communities what to do; what government must provide is a clear framework so communities understand the scope of what they can consider.

During the business plan review, the Committee had recommended that the department look at a new approach to alcohol and drug treatment since the current approach does not seem to be particularly successful. Part of this was looking at the roles of the alcohol and drug treatment facilities in the NWT. Members recognize that these facilities have not always been used to full capacity in the past. The Committee thought the new funding arrangement was intended in part to encourage facilities to increase occupancy. The new formula provides for some core funding. Facilities can then receive per diem rates up to 100% of the old core funding. With the upper limit capped, members questioned how this encourages facilities to have full occupancy and the additional costs for staff and supplies that go along with more use.

When discussing capital, members questioned the Minister about changes to two proposed health center replacements. They were concerned about why funds were moved from one project to another. There were also questions about the capital planning process and how priorities could change in the short period from passing the capital budget in May to when the changes were made in the summer. Members listened carefully to the Minister's explanations for the changes, including the involvement of mayors and councils from the affected communities. Without clear guidelines regarding changes to the capital plan, the Minister was forced to make a decision based in part on subjective factors. The Committee hopes that the new policy on capital changes will assist Ministers in making objective choices in consultation with the appropriate Member and Standing Committee.

JUSTICE

The key initiative in reviewing the mid-year activity report of this department was community justice. It is clear from the overcrowding in our correctional facilities that the current approach to dealing with those who break the law is not working. Members see community justice as a possible solution. Unfortunately, the department has not been able to provide a clear framework for community justice to the Committee. As with community wellness, members believes the while the government should not tell communities how to do community justice, there must be a concrete and practical framework for communities to use as a starting point.

The Committee was pleased to hear about the success of two programs which increase the participation of northerners in local policing. There was a very successful community constable project with the RCMP where more than 20 by-law officers from across the north received training at RCMP training headquarters in Regina. These officers will now provide backup to the RCMP in their communities. In Yellowknife, civilians were sworn in as auxiliary officer to assist the police in specific areas. This again seems to be very successful and hopefully can be implemented in some of the other large communities.

The Committee also encourages the government to actively pursue opportunities under the First Nations Policing program. As a program which has the dual benefits of developing aboriginal police officers and stretching our dollars for the RCMP, we need to fill some of the available positions.

Any opportunities to continue these programs are supported by the Committee.

One of the reduction options presented by the department during the business plans was eliminating inmate pay. After it was approved by the Standing Committee, the Minister decided to place this reduction on hold. During the mid-year review, the Minister indicated first that there was a 50% reduction to inmate pay and then later that there was no change to inmate pay. The Committee would like clarification of what is happening with inmate pay.